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# Hey, John, can I have a peek at your A-bomb?

By Ewart Rouse  
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It had all the elements of an offbeat spy spoof.

An "average" college student designed an atomic bomb to prove a point — if he could do it, so could terrorists.

As word of his design got out, everyone came after him. First, the girls, whom he didn't mind. He had always liked girls, and could deal with them.

But then came the spies, representatives of foreign governments, the FBI and the CIA.

Suddenly worried about being kidnaped, the student hired a bodyguard, contemplated wearing a bulletproof vest, used a code name, and generally tried to keep his sanity when others around him seemed to be losing theirs.

A plot for a book? A movie?

Yes, but in this case the story is true. It happened to John Aristotle Phillips, Princeton University's "A-Bomb Kid." The story of how Phillips, 23, designed the bomb as part of a classroom project in 1976 is well-known. That story was covered extensively by the media — from the campus newspaper to Walter Cronkite — and was flashed around the world by the wire services. However, the big story, at least as far as Phillips is concerned, is in what happened after the public found out about his bomb design.

This is the story Phillips tells in a book called "Mushroom," which was published by William Morrow & Co. and which Phillips was promoting last week in Philadelphia. "It's a humorous book of college life in the '70s," the author-bomb designer explained. "It traces my life, and has aspects of college life everyone can relate to. It's a story of a friendship with my roommate (David Michaelis, the book's co-author)."

## Interview

And it is a story of people who thought that Phillips actually had built an atomic bomb (it is illegal to do so) and wanted to see and even photograph it. "Listen, kid," one news photographer told him, "I know you're hiding it for the country and all, but you sure we can't do one of you standing next to the bomb?"

And it is a story of the South African woman who wanted to marry him; the Texas gun collector who wanted an autographed copy of the design to add to his collection; the New York woman who asked him to discover the source of a psychic disorder.

Then there was the Italian newspaper that retouched his photograph, putting a generous amount of hair on his chest and making him look mucho macho — a stud, as he called it. A Japanese magazine published a caricature of him with Oriental eyes and an exaggerated smile.

Then there was the scene in which his friend, dressed as Princeton's Tiger mascot at a football game, was mistaken for Phillips and was chased by a mob of photographers and autograph seekers.

But the book is also a story with overtones of espionage:

Phillips had two encounters with a mysterious Giuseppe Verdini, who claimed that he was an Italian newspaperman but who wanted not a story, but a copy of the design. The first encounter was in Phillips' dorm, and he threw the man out. He next ran into him in a crowded New York rail station, but managed to elude him by hopping on what he thought was a Princeton-bound train — only to discover that it

In addition, Phillips received calls from a man identifying himself as Ali Zai of the Pakistani embassy in Washington. He, too, wanted a copy of the design, saying, "We'll make it worth your while."

About that time, the Pakistanis were attempting to purchase a nuclear facility, including a plutonium reprocessing plant, from France, against the objections of the United States. The Pakistanis had claimed that they had no intention of building a bomb. "Just when the deal is going to go through, this Pakistani guy is caught with his pants down trying to get a design from an undergraduate," Phillips said. Realizing the international implications of the Pakistani's approach to him, Phillips, a tousle-haired, athletic fellow who does not scare easily, suddenly was scared. He called Sen. William Proxmire, who promptly informed the CIA and FBI.

The CIA, Phillips said, contacted him at Princeton, but he refused — for security reasons, he says — to divulge their conversation. Next, he was visited by an FBI agent, who, half in jest, assigned him the code name Aristotle, and gave himself the code name "Curious George."

Curious George warned Aristotle that his telephone might be tapped — by the Soviets. "It's interesting to what lengths the Soviets and others will go to find out what's being said over the telephone," said Curious George.

Yes, all this is for real.

All that happened, Phillips wrote, left him shocked, excited and bewildered — "like Dorothy when she lands in Oz." He views himself as an unlikely hero of this Great American Whoopee, as he calls the chain reaction of public attention that followed the news of his bomb plan.

After all, according to Phillips, he was just an average all-American boy who grew his hair long, wore faded jeans, published an underground newspaper and was branded a radical by some, but was known as more of a practical joker by his buddies.

How much of a joker? Well, when the stage collapsed on the opening night of a high school senior-class play, someone in the audience shouted, "Phillips did it!"

At the University of California at Berkeley, his first college, he

swallowed live goldfish, drank beer and dated sorority girls. And when he transferred to Princeton, his mother admonished him to brush his teeth, to take his vitamins, to stay away from junk foods and, please, to write home to the family in Connecticut — but not for money.

At Princeton, he played the cowbell in the marching band, became the Princeton Tiger mascot, rode a unicycle around campus and started a pizza delivery service.

Just an average kid, he insists.

Then he designed the bomb, got an A for his paper, and all hell broke loose.

Still, it seems, Phillips has remained unaffected by it all. He is making money doing talk shows and lectures, and he is promoting his book. He hopes to be an inventor and is saving his money toward that end.

And, oh yes, he has sold his story to a Hollywood producer, who flew him out to Hollywood, picked him up in a black limousine at the airport, took him to the parties. "with all the champagne and everything else."

He will play himself in the movie, which is being planned for NBC television.

"It was an amazing experience to be flown out there, at 22, to make a movie about your life in which you are playing yourself," Phillips said in the interview. "It was incredible."

Particularly for just an average kid.